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The Mabinogi and the Shadow of Celtic Mythology¹

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In March 2015, Aberystwyth Arts Centre hosted the ‘Mabinogi Project’, advertised on its website as ‘an unedited bi-lingual day-long illustrated telling of the four branches of Y Mabinogi’.² The use of the word ‘unedited’ struck me as peculiar, and led me to wonder what a really unedited version of the Four Branches would look like. Now, one can see, without leaving the house, excellent colour reproductions of the two most important medieval manuscripts which contain the Four Branches, namely the White Book of Rhydderch of c. 1350, and the Red Book of Hergest of c. 1400, both of which have been digitized and are available for free on the internet.³ But even these do not represent ‘unedited’ versions of the text. We know that the Four Branches existed in earlier manuscripts because we have fragments (Peniarth 6i and ii) dating from the second half of the thirteenth century.⁴ Assuming for now that all of these manuscript versions descend independently from a common lost exemplar,⁵ we can see that at least some of the copyists have altered (or ‘edited’) the text in small, but sometimes significant, ways (see, e.g., Hughes, 2007a, xix). How faithfully the exemplar recorded the words of the author is anyone’s guess.

Unfortunately we don’t know who that author was, or where or when he wrote (McKenna, 2003, 107, 116; Rodway, 2007, 58-59). It has been claimed that he was a ‘she’. This is not impossible, but, sadly, it is statistically unlikely: we have no conclusive proof of literature by women in Welsh before the fifteenth century, and the evidence advanced in favour of female authorship for the Four Branches (e.g. in Breeze, 2009) is circumstantial.⁶ It is also possible that some or all of the Branches were composed by different authors.⁷ I am quite prepared to entertain this latter possibility. Nonetheless, as it does not much affect my concerns in this paper, I shall for now accept the traditional idea that there was one author and that he was a man: I hope that I can be forgiven for my use of the masculine pronoun in what follows. Of course, he was using traditional material, disseminated orally. He may have merely written down tales from the storytellers’ repertoire without changing very much at all. Many have assumed this. Even so, he must surely have indulged in a certain amount of ‘editing’ (cf. Davies, 1989, 18; Hughes, 2017, xvii). Either he, or one of his copyists, refers to events that happened ‘above’: this is an address to someone who is reading a text on a page,

¹ Versions of this paper were read at the Aberystwyth Storytelling Festival in the Aberystwyth Arts Centre on 10 March 2017, at the Four Branches of the Mabinogi Symposium at the School of Welsh in Cardiff University on 8 July 2017, and at a seminar on ‘The Mabinogi and the Modern World’ organized by the Department of Welsh and Celtic Studies and the English Department in Aberystwyth University on 29 November 2017. I am very grateful to those who discussed it with me on all three occasions, and also to Shumita Palit, Shan Morgain, Richard Glyn Roberts and an anonymous reviewer for perceptive and useful comments on various drafts. I alone am responsible for the conclusions drawn and for any remaining errors.

² <https://www.aberystwythartscentre.co.uk/talks-spoken-word/proiect-mabinogi-project> (accessed 13 December 2016).

³ White Book: <https://www.llgc.org.uk/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/the-middle-ages/white-book-of-rhydderch/>; Red Book: <http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=jesus&manuscript=ms111> (both accessed 13 December 2016).

⁴ On the date of Peniarth 6i and ii, see Huws, 2000, 58, 245; on the White Book, Huws, 2000, 59, 228, 234, 239; on the Red Book, Huws, 2000, 47, 60, 82, 254.

⁵ For various views on this issue, see the references cited by Huws, 2000, 255, nn. 55 and 56, to which can be added Hughes, 2007a, x; Hughes, 2017, ii.

⁶ See discussion in Rodway, 2007, 48-51, and the further references given in Rodway, 2013, 6, n. 16.

⁷ See Davies, 1986; Davies, 1989, 5, 44-45, 76; Sturzer, 2003, 134-39; cf. Hughes, 2007a, xix; Hughes, 2017, xiv-xvii.

not hearing it told (Sturzer, 2003, 131; Hughes, 2007a, 15; Hughes, 2017, 24; cf. Hughes, 2007b, 100-01).

At any rate, most of us do not read the Four Branches straight from the medieval manuscripts: the versions which we encounter have been much more thoroughly ‘edited’. Most of us will be relying on a translation. Even Welsh renderings such as that by Dafydd and Rhiannon Ifans (1980) are ‘re-wordings’ from Middle to Modern Welsh. We are still a good step removed from the medieval text.⁸ The Welsh rewordings, like the many fine translations into English, not to mention into French, German, Italian and so on,⁹ aim to convey as nearly as possible the sense of the original. Nonetheless, all translation is a creative act. Re-tellings, like those of the Mabinogi Project, are still further removed from the original text - they are anything but ‘unedited’. There is, of course, nothing wrong with using the Four Branches as a source for creative work of any sort:¹⁰ giving the impression that people are getting the real thing is a different matter.¹¹

My principal interest, in this paper, is the cultural frameworks in which these translations and adaptations exist, and how these frameworks shape the preconceptions of their audience. Translation involves not only the replacement of words in one language with words in another: it also involves taking the text from its native cultural milieu and placing it in an alien one (cf. Lefevere, 1990, 26; Kilpatrick, 1999, 129-30).¹² Its new audience may have very different ideas about what it is about. This is particularly acute when translating from a minority to a majority language (see, e.g., Cronin, 1996, 4). Therefore, while we could legitimately see the development from presumed oral tale to lost medieval manuscript to the White Book of Rhydderch as an organic one in which the same text develops over time, translations and adaptations should be seen as new texts altogether (cf., e.g., Webb, 1998, 148).

Talking about other people’s preconceptions is a very dangerous business, so, at the risk of being self-indulgently autobiographical, I shall talk about my own preconceptions about the Four Branches, and how they have altered as I have moved closer to the text over the years. This, I hope, will be a way in to exploring some larger issues. I can’t remember exactly how I first encountered the Four Branches, but it was certainly when I was a teenager. It was either through the synopses supplied in T. W. Rolleston’s *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race* (1911), or from Proinsias Mac Cana’s account of ‘the gods of Britain’ in his *Celtic Mythology* (1970). Later, I read the translation by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (1949), and later still, as a student in Aberystwyth, the edition by Ifor Williams (1930). Ultimately, I reached the manuscripts themselves. Needless to say, my take on the stories now is very different to my first impressions as a book-devouring teenager in deepest, darkest England. At that time, I had never been to Wales, and, like many people in England, knew nothing about it.

At any rate, the Four Branches were not presented to me as ‘Welsh literature’, but as ‘Celtic mythology’, and this had a profound effect on my preconceptions about them. While I knew that I knew nothing about Wales, I thought that I knew plenty about the Celts. I would

⁸ Much less edited is T. H. Parry-Williams’s rendition in modern Welsh orthography (Parry-Williams, 1959).

⁹ For a recent list of translations into various languages, see Hughes, 2013, xiii-xv (there is a slightly updated list in Welsh in Hughes, 2017, ii-iii). Sioned Davies (2010) discusses issues faced by translators of the *Mabinogion* tales into English.

¹⁰ Literature in English inspired by the Four Branches has spawned a mini-industry of critical works: e.g. Sullivan, 1989; Filmer-Davies, 1996; White, 1998; Cusick, 2001; Becker and Noone, 2011; Bartels-Bland, 2014; Boyd, 2015; Bednarski, 2016; Parker, 2017-18. For a discussion of modern Welsh-language poetry inspired by the Four Branches, see Jones, 2007. Cf. Davies, 1989, 76, for further references to echoes of the Four Branches in Modern Welsh literature.

¹¹ Cf. the perceptive comments of Webb, 1998, 188.

¹² I am grateful to Shan Morgain for introducing me to Lefevere’s excellent paper.

like to look at what I thought I knew and why I thought I knew it. This necessitates quite a long digression, but bear with me: I shall return to the Four Branches in due course. My image of the Celts was shaped not only by popularizing books by scholars, but also by works of fiction, principally the Asterix series, the novels of Rosemary Sutcliff, and Pat Mills's 'Celtic berserker' [sic!] Sláine from the weekly comic *2000 AD*. In fact, Asterix is pretty good as far as it goes: most of my Classical history I learned from reading Asterix books. Of course, the Gaulish Celts of Asterix are really ciphers for the modern French. Nonetheless, this image of quarrelsome, individualistic, fun-loving, and essentially decent Gauls, in contrast to the arrogant, money-grabbing, conformist and bureaucratic Romans, surely coloured the way in which I think about historical Gauls and Romans.¹³

Turning to Rosemary Sutcliff and Sláine, we move further away from any sort of historical reality. It is well-known that the strange hybrid creature known as the 'Hollywood Indian' is alive and well in films featuring Native Americans. Ward Churchill has this to say of the 1970 film *A Man Called Horse* (Churchill, 1992, 237):

this droll adventure, promoted as 'the most authentic description of North American Indian life ever filmed', depicts a people whose language is Lakota, whose hairstyles range from Assiniboin through Nez Percé to Comanche, whose tipi design is Crow, and whose Sun Dance ceremony and the lodge in which it is held are both typically Mandan.

The Hollywood Indian has a distant relative whom I shall call the 'Home Counties Celt'. Back in 1914, the anthropologist Alanson Skinner had complained about a tendency in silent films to conflate characteristics of completely different Native American peoples (quoted in Kilpatrick, 1999, 34), and asked:

If the Indian should stage a white man's play, and dress the characters in Rumanian, Swiss, Turkish, English, Norwegian and Russian costumes, and place the setting in Ireland, would their plea that they thought all Europeans looked alike, and that they had to portray the white man's life through standards of their own save them from arousing our ridicule?

Of course not, but he might well have got away with dressing a medieval Irishman in ancient Gaulish costume. The Home Counties Celt, it seems, is not quite like other white Europeans. Indeed there is direct conceptual connection between external conceptions of 'Celts' and of 'American Indians'.¹⁴ No wonder that Rosemary Sutcliff's Brittonic warriors are called 'braves' and wear feathers in their hair.

I could cite examples of the Home Counties Celt *ad nauseam*, not only from Rosemary Sutcliff and Sláine where I first encountered him/her, but from any number of novels, films and television programmes.¹⁵ I shall give a small but, I think, representative

¹³ On this, see de Kerckove, 1981; Birkhan, 2006, 225.

¹⁴ This deserves much fuller treatment than I can possibly attempt here. A good starting point would be the excellent discussion of the mutual influence of Romantic constructions of Celt and Indian in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature by Tim Fulford (2006, *passim*, especially 7-12, 103, 120-40, 143, 153, 195-96, 273). Cf. Piggott, 1989, 73-86; Fowle, 2015, 239, on the illustrations of ancient Britons and Native Americans by Early Modern antiquarians; Olivier, 2006, 164-66, on Native Americans and Gauls in early modern French writing; L. Curtis, 1984, 58-62 on the position of Irish and Indians in nineteenth-century racial theory. For an example of the equation of Celts and Native Americans by a modern Scottish American, see D. Curtis, 2000, 132-33. For a scholarly comparison of Classical ethnography of the ancient Celts and French accounts of the Algonkian-Iroquoian peoples in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Wells, 1974. Much less scholarly is the gratuitous mention of Plains Indian sweat-lodges in a recent imaginative reconstruction of a druidic (or pseudo-druidic) ritual from Roman Gaul (Aldhouse-Green, 2017, 331).

¹⁵ Cf. Birkhan, 2006. A recent example is Jez Butterworth's TV series *Britannia* (see my comments and those of Dr Alex Woolf in the *Sunday Herald*, 29 January 2018, available online: http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/homenews/15902362.Celtic_disconnections__Britannia__39_s_gaffes_fai

sample. In Rosemary Sutcliff's *Frontier Wolf* (1980), set in 341-2 AD, her Celtic characters belong to the Brittonic-speaking 'tribe' of the Votadini.¹⁶ One of the main characters in the novel is called Cunorix, which is a perfectly acceptable fourth-century Brittonic name. His brother, however, is called Connla, which is modern Irish, and their father Ferradach Dhu, which is a real mess. Ferradach is medieval Gaelic, and Dhu, presumably, is for Welsh *du* 'black' (the Gaelic cognate is *dubh*), but with the lenition shown according to the Gaelic fashion (*d* > *dh*), rather than the Welsh (*d* > *dd*), presumably because it was felt that a double *d* at the beginning of a word would look too alien to an English reader.¹⁷ Cunorix's wife is called Shula, a name popular in modern Scotland, but not a Celtic one.

Sláine is equal parts Cú Chulainn and Conan the Barbarian.¹⁸ He wears an Iron Age torc and nineteenth-century Scottish tartan. He has a good Old Irish name (which I pronounced like the English word 'slain'): his son has the Welsh name Kai. This looks exotically Celtic in the hybrid form used in the comic (half way between Middle Welsh Kei and Modern Cai), but actually derives from Latin Caius.¹⁹

In short, my view of the Celts was very similar to that presented of 'PanCelts' in Diana Wynne Jones's perceptive parody *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (Wynne Jones, 1996, 142-43):

PanCelts are frequently red-haired. They wear plaids and have NAMES you must consult the glossary in order to pronounce. By the Rules (pronounced GEAS) which govern them, they have to call ELVES Shee (pronounced Sidhe) and refer to the ENEMY as Shadow. Otherwise they are nice people who drink a lot of the water of life (pronounced Uisce) and love to tell you LEGENDS by firelight. They also fight a lot and rather well, since both women and men train hard from the age of ten. But there is no such thing as an ordinary PanCelt. Each of them is either a MAGIC USER or a BARD or a Druid (pronounced like a sneeze), or sometimes all three (in which case you pronounce it Merlin).²⁰ They are governed by strong and beautiful QUEENS called things like Maebdh Aeiolaen (pronounced Mad Eileen) or strong and serious KINGS called, for instance, Daibhaeidhaibh MacAeraith (pronounced Dave Mate), and they appear to worship the Welsh Bard Taliesin. It is in this Bard's honour that they all sing so much, even more than the Shee/Elves do. And, like the Elves, they are prone to go on about how much better things were in the Old Days, when a HERO could walk in one day from Caer Dibdh to the sea by taking a short cut though Tir n'an og (pronounced The Many-Coloured Land).

l_to_win_over_historians/). For discussion of the Home Counties Celt's American cousin on film and television, see L. Jones, 2000.

¹⁶ Traditionally located around modern Edinburgh, the historical Votadini were the ancestors of the Gododdin of Welsh tradition (see, e.g., Dillon and Chadwick, 1967, 51, 79; Jackson, 1969, 69-70).

¹⁷ The tribe's inevitable druid, however, is called Morvidd, presumably the Welsh girl's name Morfydd (a case of a boy named Sue?), with the Welsh *f* and *y* replaced by more Saxon-friendly characters, but *dd* allowed to stand - I blithely pronounced it /d/.

¹⁸ Further on Sláine, see Birkhan, 2006, 225-26.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Richards, 1970, 257, rejecting Robert M. Jones's Irish derivation (Jones, 1950-52), on which see further Sims-Williams, 2011, 155-57. We can also discount John Rhys's derivation of the name from *Cauo* (Rhys, 1879, 217-18) as being phonologically impossible. John Koch (2006, 325) suggests a derivation from 'a native Celtic **cagios* "man with a closure", Welsh *cae* (i.e. "brooch", "torc", or "fortified court")'. Patrick Sims-Williams (2011, 155, n. 126) objects that **cagios* would regularly give *cae* (see Jackson, 1953, 450-51; Schrijver, 1995, 306), but in fact *-*agi*- does apparently also give Middle Welsh *-ei* in two cases, the agent suffix *-hei* < *-*sagios* (Jackson, 1953, 448-49; Russell, 1989, 38; Zimmer, 2000, 287); *llei* 'less' < *lagiūs*. Both examples are discounted by Peter Schrijver (1995, 304-6, 312), however, who provides an alternative derivation of *-hei*, and explains the affection in *llei* as due to /i/ < /ū/ rather than from /i/. An anonymous reviewer suggests to me that in the case of *Kei* we could have an agent suffix (synchronically *-i*) affixed to **cagio*- which would cause affection (thus 'encloser' *vel sim*?), but I cannot call to mind any examples of such an agent suffix in Welsh. At any rate, derivation from Latin *Caius* is quite unproblematic.

²⁰ This is particularly insightful. On the Romantic tendency to imbue the Celts as a whole with the characteristics of quite atypical and marginal figures in Celtic-speaking societies, namely bards and druids, see Sims-Williams, 1986, 95; Sims-Williams, 1996, 103-4.

The lack of rigour applied to Celtic subjects in fiction lies alongside a widespread perception that the Celts themselves have an elastic relationship with the world of empirically provable facts. According to Irish-American poet and cultural historian William Irwin Thompson, 'It's difficult for us to take "reality" very seriously and to believe that the world is made out of matter, a substance which can only be described by weighing, measuring and calculating [...] For a Celt the world is made out of music' (Thompson, 1981, 597).²¹ As Tolkien once famously remarked: 'To many, perhaps to most people outside the small company of the great scholars, past and present, "Celtic" of any sort is [...] a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything comes' (Tolkien, 1963, 29).²²

I have dwelt on this in order to emphasise that I, on learning that these bewitching tales that I had discovered were 'Celtic myths', had very little to guide me in terms of fixing them in time and place. Wales is a real country, with a football team, and a national anthem, and a capital city. Arberth and Harlech and so on are real places that you can visit today.²³ 'Celtica', in this particular incarnation, is more like Annwn, or Narnia. It, like the world of the Hollywood Indian, belongs to the margins, and to the past.²⁴ In this, the Home Counties Celt is very much like the Romantic Celt of the nineteenth century,²⁵ with which he or she shares much DNA. In 1854, Ernest Renan published his highly influential essay *La poésie des races celtiques*. I quote from William G. Hutchison's English translation of 1896 (Renan, 1896, 2-3):²⁶

Alas! it too is doomed to disappear, this emerald set in the western seas. Arthur will return no more from his isle of faery, and St. Patrick was right when he said to Ossian, "The heroes that thou weepest are dead; can they be born again?" It is high time to note, before they shall have passed away, the divine tones thus expiring on the horizon before the growing tumult of uniform civilisation.

Like Tolkien's Elves, with their deliberately Welsh-sounding languages, the Celts are heading west on a one-way ticket. In fact, Celticity sometimes checks out before the actual Celts. Matthew Arnold, a great admirer of Renan, notes in his opening lecture of his series 'On the Study of Celtic Literature' (1865-66) a disappointing lack of Celticity at an Eisteddfod he visited in Llandudno in 1863.²⁷ Indeed, the de-Celticization of the Celt was already underway when the Four Branches were committed to writing, according to Arnold (1962, 322):

²¹ Sims-Williams, 1986, 74-76 has put together a catalogue of similarly nonsensical statements culled from O'Driscoll, 1981, and from Kearney, 1985. They could quite easily be multiplied. Cf. Sims-Williams, 2013, 426, on the background to the former publication.

²² I am aware that I am perpetuating a long tradition of taking this quotation (aimed at 'the more extreme absurdities of some linguistic etymologies' (Evans, 1999, 11, n. 44)) out of context, a tradition which I deplored in Rodway, 2010, 13, n. 15. Cf. Cunliffe, 2003, 3, in a section of his *Very Short Introduction* to the Celts tellingly titled 'All Things to All Men'.

²³ Although there is some dispute about where the Arberth of the Four Branches is (see Jones, 1992; Bollard, 2006, 24-25; Hughes, 2007a, 30-31; Breeze, 2009, 18, 90-91, 136), I see no good reason to doubt that it is Narberth (Welsh *Arberth*) in Pembrokeshire (medieval Dyfed).

²⁴ On the 'disappearing Indian' in Hollywood, see, e.g., Kilpatrick, 1999, 142-43, 148, 154-56, 213. For his/her counterpart in Early Modern English literature, see Fulford, 2006, 30, 96-97, 194-96, 202-3, 205-6, 257.

²⁵ On the construction of the Romantic Celt, see Rodway, 2010, 11-13, and references there cited.

²⁶ Similarly wistful statements can be found even in serious academic work, e.g. Flower, 1947, 105, on oral traditions about Fionn mac Cumhaill in the Great Blasket: 'To-morrow this too will be dead, and the world will be the poorer when this last shade of that which once was great has passed away.' On Flower's complicated relationship with romantic Celticism, see Sims-Williams, 1998a, 75-78.

²⁷ Other Romantic authors, including John Thelwall, Samuel Coleridge and Robert Southey were likewise disappointed by the failure of contemporary Wales to live up to their Romantic expectations (Fulford, 2006, 132-33). Cf. Sims-Williams, 1986, 83.

The very first thing that strikes one, in reading the *Mabinogion*, is how evidently the mediæval story-teller is pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret; he is like a peasant building his hut on the site of Halicarnassus or Ephesus; he builds, but what he builds is full of materials of which he does not know the history, or knows by a glimmering tradition merely; - stones “not of this building”, but of an older architecture, greater, cunninger, more majestic.

Just as in Hollywood films in which it takes a white protagonist (Kevin Costner’s Lieutenant John Dunbar, say) to teach the Indians how to be truly Indian, so it took the quintessentially English Arnold to recognize the Celticity of the Four Branches.

This is fitting, because, like the Hollywood Indian, the Romantic Celt (and his or her successor from the Home Counties) is an external construct, by and for non-Celts.²⁸ It might be objected that Ernest Renan, the first to produce a synthetic account of the Romantic Celt, was a Celtic-speaking Breton. This is true, but he had completely aligned himself with the French national project.²⁹ He was, if you like, poacher turned gamekeeper, and he presented his French audience with exactly the sort of Celts they wanted: sensitive, poetic, child-like, feminized, spiritual and safely marginal.³⁰ This was equally attractive to disillusioned Romantics in other urbanized, industrialized societies in England, Germany and elsewhere. This was an audience brought up on James Macpherson’s forged ancient Gaelic epics, and now avidly devouring Walter Scott’s tartan fantasy version of the ‘Celtic’ Scottish Highlands.

The nineteenth-century Romantics knew about ancient Celts due to their good Classical education, in which Caesar’s *Conquest of Gaul* played a central part. They also knew, thanks to the excellent work of pioneering linguists such as Edward Lhuyd, that the Brittonic and Gaelic languages were cousins to those spoken by the Celts in Antiquity (Rodway, 2010, 15). It was inevitable, given the nineteenth-century preoccupation with pseudo-scientific racism,³¹ that these ‘Celtic-speakers’ would be transformed into a ‘Celtic race’, with innate faults and virtues quite different from those of the ‘Teutonic’ English and Germans. One prominent characteristic assigned to the Celts was a bloody-minded conservatism and resistance to change, a ‘stonelike’ character, ‘immutable as their rough druidic monuments which they still revere’ as Jules Michelet wrote in 1833 (quoted in Rigney, 1996, 175). According to Renan (1896, 23), ‘The stone, in truth, seems the natural symbol of the Celtic races’.³² In this they are predictably similar to the Native Americans, according to nineteenth-century observers such as Francis Parkman (quoted in Kilpatrick, 1999, 46):

²⁸ See Rodway, 2010, 13 and references cited in n. 13. Another comparandum, which has often been made, is the Western construction of ‘the Orient’, famously discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). See the references cited in Rodway, 2010, 13, to which could be added Jones, 1998, 385. Simon Brooks recently discussed perceptively the parallels between nineteenth-century Celtic Studies and Gypsy Studies, in a lecture entitled ‘Astudiaethau Celtaidd ac Astudiaethau Sipsiaidd: Dwy Gangen o’r Un Cyff?’, delivered in Aberystwyth University on 5 April 2017.

²⁹ Cf. Robyn Lewis’s comments on Welsh people who ‘make it’ in England by assimilating to the dominant culture (Lewis, 1969, 2-3). Patrick Sims-Williams (1986, 77) sees ‘Celtic racial myths’ as ‘to a considerable extent the product of willing conspiracies between non-Celts and Celts, particularly Celts living in exile and interpreting their people to a foreign audience, with varying degrees of sincerity.’ Cf. Jonathan Wooding’s discussion of ‘nationalism in which formerly colonialist ideas concerning native peoples were subsequently adopted by the colonised themselves as a tool for decolonisation’ (Wooding, 2017, 60).

³⁰ On the feminization of the Celts, see Patterson, 1990-91.

³¹ See, for example, L. P. Curtis, 1971; L. Curtis, 1984, 54-63; Morse, 2005, 120-21. For an account of the development of pseudo-scientific racism with reference to Native Americans, see Fulford, 2006, 82-98.

³² Cf. Renan, 1896, 6-7 for further discussion of Celtic immutability. Indeed, the Celts are perceived to be so resistant to change that E. M. Forster, in the ‘Introductory Note’ to the English translation of Muiris Ó Súilleabháin’s memoir about growing up on the Great Blasket Island in the early years of the twentieth century, felt able to inform the reader that ‘[h]e is about to read an account of neolithic civilisation from the inside’ (Forster, 1933, v)!

some races of men seem molded in wax, soft and melting, at once plastic and feeble. Some races, like some metals, combine the greatest flexibility with the greatest strength. But the Indian is hewn of rock. You cannot change the form without destruction of the substance [...]; it is this fixed and rigid quality which has proved his ruin. He will not learn the arts of civilization, and he and his forest must perish together.

I am sure I do not need to point out the similarity between this statement and Renan's prognosis for the Celts.

At least Renan's doomed Celts possessed a nobility quite absent from the savages described by many of the Classical authors.³³ Scratch the surface, however, and you find that the Romantic Celt and the Classical Celt have a lot in common. In fact, as Malcolm Chapman (1992) has persuasively demonstrated, they are two sides of the same coin. The Classical authors, like the modern English (or perhaps I should say Anglophone British), had a high opinion of their own culture. They were mostly interested in other cultures insofar as they acted as stooges to point up the excellence of their own. They lumped the rest of the world together as *barbaroi* - people who, rather than speak a civilized language like Greek, babble 'bar bar'. Our word *barbarian*, with all its negative connotations, derives from this term.

This is probably a universal human trait. We set up a largely illusory dichotomy between the civilized, decent Self and the savage and dastardly Other. Of course we can often correct the prejudices of one group by looking at those of the other. In the words of Rudyard Kipling (quoted by Megaw and Megaw, 1999, 19):

You may end up by (think of it!) looking on We
As only a sort of They!

This is not an option in the case of the ancient Celts, who left us no history (Sims-Williams, 1998, 24). We can only see them through the distorting lens of the Classical world, a bestial, chaotic rabble. The Romantics, who belonged to nations who had inherited from the Classical world ideas about their centrality in the natural order, did not challenge the veracity of these canonical descriptions. They retained the binary oppositions between Self and Other intact, but reversed the moral judgement, turning the rose-tinted glasses onto the Other. Instead of 'bestial', the Celts were 'natural', instead of 'chaotic', they were 'free-spirited' and so on (see Chapman, 1992, 210-13). Crucially, however, the power structure remained the same: the Celts were still on the margins, serving as ammunition in attacks on perceived failings in the dominant culture.³⁴ Arnold, arch-Unionist that he was, made it his mission to assimilate the 'Celtic Fringe', so that the Celtic 'genius' could contribute to the Great British imperial project. The Celtic languages were, of course, a tiresome impediment, but, as the Celts were conceived of as a race, their innate characteristics would survive the extirpation of their native tongues (Arnold, 1962, 296-98).³⁵

³³ There is a current of 'romanticism' in some Classical accounts of Celtic-speakers, however, who contrasted an idealized image of 'barbarian' honesty and simplicity with the perceived hypocrisy and decadence of their own society, e.g. the fabricated 'they make a desert and call it peace' speech (*Agricola* 29-32) which Tacitus puts in the mouth of the northern British chieftain Calgacus, presenting him as the antithesis of what Tacitus felt was wrong with Rome. Cf. Dio Cassius's favourable comparison of the 'free love' allegedly practiced by northern British women with the hypocrisy of Roman women (including the Empress) who conduct clandestine affairs (Birley, 1979, 28).

³⁴ Native Americans were also used in this way in the same period - see Fulford, 2006, Part II, *passim*.

³⁵ See further Ned Thomas's perceptive critique of what he calls 'contributionism', the 'rationale for a certain set of terms on which the Welsh, Basques and Bretons were invited to participate more fully in the accelerating development of the great nation-states. Stated brutally, the terms are these: the Basque, Breton and Welsh languages must die, but the peoples who speak these languages have unique and important contributions to make to the state' (Thomas, 1984, quotation on p. 1).

All this is nonsense, of course. Nobody in their right mind believes in innate racial characteristics any more, or that Celt and Teuton are ‘separated by an impassable gulf’ (Arnold, 1962, 299). Nonetheless, the paradigm has been stubbornly persistent, even though the tenets which maintained it have been swept away. The Celts have been separated from the Celtic-speakers and have become the common property of all who inhabit the detritus of Arnold’s Great British Empire, obligingly mute ciphers onto which the fantasies of the age can be projected. Marion Bowman (e.g. 2000) speaks of ‘Cardiac Celts’, non-Celtic-speakers who feel in their hearts that they are somehow ‘Celtic’ (cf. Dietler, 2006, 239). They search for ‘ageless, eternal wisdom’ (Lines, 1981, 593) through ‘Celtic music’, ‘Celtic spirituality’ and so forth,³⁶ facilitated by New Age charlatans like John and Caitlin Matthews, who reimagine the Four Branches as a pseudo-shamanic personal quest (e.g. Matthews, 1987).³⁷ As Michael Dietler (2006, 245) points out, ‘This is not radically different from the position of Native Americans who see their sacred sites overrun by white middle-class New Age shamans’.³⁸ At a more sober level, certain academics with little or no interest in the modern speakers of Welsh or Irish and their beleaguered communities, dissect in elegant English or German the ‘literature of the Celts’, sweeping away the peasants’ huts in search of Halicarnassus or Ephesus.³⁹ Meanwhile, the majority of non-Celtic-speakers, even those who come in to daily contact with those languages, are simply uninterested. The Celts belong with other esoteric subjects which no-one is obliged to know anything about, like astrology or yoga.⁴⁰ Harri Webb (1998, 182) noted that:

Despite a vague knowledge of the Welsh tradition of minstrelsy, very few of even the keenest and most sensitive minds in England have ever shown the slightest interest in the mere existence of Welsh literature, let alone any desire to exploit its riches. The sad fact must be faced that we are even more boring to the English than they are to us, which is saying a good deal.

He adds (Webb, 1998, 187): ‘Welsh made its most notable appeal to the marginals, the eccentrics and the loners among the English poets’.

Ultimately, the Greeks are to blame for this, as was neatly explained by Arnaldo Momigliano in his excellent book *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*, and I make no excuse for quoting at length from it (Momigliano, 1975, 11-12):⁴¹

Hellenism still affects our attitude towards ancient civilizations. Since the time of Attila many factors have contributed to the erosion of the Hellenistic view of the world, but *homo Europaeus* has remained intellectually conditioned by his Hellenistic ancestors. [...] The Celts, who were only superficially touched by Hellenistic civilization and represented the greatest terror for both Greeks and Romans, have simply been left outside the

³⁶ On ‘Celtic music’, see, e.g., Harrison, 1986; Thornton, 2000; Cunliffe, 2003, 2, 135-36. On ‘Celtic spirituality’, e.g. Bowman, 2000; Meek, 2000.

³⁷ The use of the term ‘charlatan’ may seem unnecessarily judgemental (contrast the careful neutrality of Bowman, 2000, for instance). I feel it is justified, on the grounds of the claims of ‘authority’ and ‘authenticity’ which they explicitly make. I saw them in action at the Findhorn Foundation in the mid-1990s. They gave the impossible etymology ‘white horn’ for *Findhorn*, apparently received by ‘channelling’ a spirit guide, and claimed on this basis that Findhorn’s totem animal was the unicorn. (Bowman (2000, 87) states that ‘Channelled material tends to come in the language of the receiver, regardless of the supposed transmitter’, which is convenient!). This was, of course, calculated to appeal to the audience, who were duly delighted. The real source of this statement, I strongly suspect, is the novel *Elidor* by Alan Garner (1965) which features a unicorn named Findhorn. For a scholarly discussion of the etymology of *Findhorn* (‘white Ireland’?), see Watson, 1926, 49, 230; Nicholaisen, 1976, 187; Clancy, 2010, 88-90. I am grateful to Dr Guto Rhys for the last reference.

³⁸ Cf. Meek, 2000, 33-36.

³⁹ I do not for a moment mean to suggest that all research conducted in English and German on Celtic-language literature falls into this category, or that there is no high quality research in the Celtic languages.

⁴⁰ See discussion by Chapman, 1992, 228-30.

⁴¹ Cf. discussion by Sims-Williams, 1998b, 23-24. A similar point is made by D. Ellis Evans (1986, 210).

horizon of the traditional civilized Western world. The picture we give of them is still that of Posidonius. Vercingetorix, Boudicca [sic] and a few Druids are allowed to remind the schoolboys [sic] of the European community that the Celts did exist in the age of the Romans. The average knowledge of an educated modern man [sic] about India is not superior to that which is to be found in Greek and Roman writers. Even now there is no obligation in our traditional curriculum to know anything about China because the Greeks and Romans knew nothing or almost nothing about it. The eighteenth century performed the greatest rescue operation for forgotten civilizations humanity had ever witnessed. The Chinese, the Indians and the Celts were the greatest beneficiaries. But the consequences were only felt by professors, philosophers, poets and cranks.

It thus is no surprise to find that, until recently, virtually all the creative work in English inspired by the Four Branches belongs to *genres* which have traditionally been kept at the margins of the literary canon: children's literature, storytelling and fantasy.

The Celtic-speakers are faced with a double whammy. Their medieval literature, rebranded as 'legends' or 'mythology', is appropriated by a privileged audience that largely remains wilfully ignorant of their modern culture (cf. Chapman, 1978, 28). At the same time, the languages suffer from the side effects of the Celtic paradigm. The Celtic label is quite justifiable in a linguistic context. Welsh and Irish and so forth are more closely related to the languages of the ancient Celts of the Continent than they are to anything else. This is a scientific fact.⁴² That all of the living Celtic languages are on the endangered list is an unhappy accident of history. They possess no inherent tendency towards obsolescence. Under other circumstances they might have flourished. Nonetheless the baggage carried by the term 'Celtic' makes it easy to present them as linguistic dinosaurs, innately marginal and conservative, destined for a moribund half-life in which their role is to provide frills for a utilitarian Anglophone culture. This sort of attitude was memorably summed up in verse by Harri Webb (quoted in Jenkins and Williams, 2000, v):

Let's do our best for the ancient tongue,
Its music's so delightful,
We dearly love to hear it sung,
But speak it? Oh, how frightful!

Renan said that the 'Celtic race' was 'before all else a domestic race, fitted for family life and fireside joys' (Renan, 1896, 5-6). This same verdict is now often made in linguistic rather than racial terms.

It is ironic that the author of the Four Branches would not have considered himself a Celt. By his time, the Welsh did not use the term of themselves, and neither did the Gaels: indeed they may never have done. He had almost certainly never heard the word, and, if he had, he probably would have connected it with the Gauls of Antiquity (cf. Tolkien, 1963, 13). He had a low opinion of the Irish, as we can see from the Second Branch, and he would no doubt have been upset to be told that they were his cousins. He would have been bemused by any Asterix-style opposition between Celt and Roman: the medieval Welsh were proud of their *romanitas* (Evans, 1983, 981-82). Any Celticity in these texts is unconscious.

This does not mean, however, that they might not contain echoes of Celtic mythology. It is certain that some of the characters bear the names of pagan gods. This is not, in itself, surprising. Early Christians sometimes applied the arguments of Euhemerus to the pantheons of the pagans they were in the process of converting: in other words, they assured their new disciples that the characters they had hitherto worshipped, while not divine, were still worthy of remembrance as remarkable human beings. We catch glimpses of this process at work in Ireland (Carney, 2005, 463-64). However, Chaucer's reference to the pagan Germanic deity

⁴² See Rodway, 2010, 17, and the references cited there, to which can be added Isaac, 2011.

Wade hardly makes the ‘Merchant’s Tale’ a Germanic myth. We cannot be in the least bit certain that the extant stories told in Welsh or Irish about euhemerized deities reflect in any way pre-Christian myth. In the rare cases in which we have plausible reflexes of a given deity in both Welsh and Irish, e.g. Lleu Llaw Gyffes and Lug Lámfota, corresponding linguistically to Gaulish Lugus, we are disappointed to find that the stories about them are quite dissimilar (see Hutton, 2011, 75).⁴³ While Manawydan fab Llŷr must be somehow related to Irish Manannán mac Lir (although the names are not exactly equivalent),⁴⁴ and while the latter, on the evidence of the late Old Irish *Sanas Cormaic* (‘Cormac’s Glossary’) was worshipped as a sea-god in Ireland and in Britain,⁴⁵ Manawydan’s role in the Four Branches is nothing like the stories extant about Manannán and has nothing maritime about it: it has the appearance of being a late literary creation (Hughes, 2007a, xlii-xliii; cf. Chadwick and Chadwick, 1932, I, 114; Bromwich, 2006, 433-34; Sims-Williams, 2011, 13).⁴⁶ Using extant stories about euhemerized gods to reconstruct a myth, even if we accept that the attempt is a valid one, is going to involve a lot of arbitrary decisions. We cannot triangulate with ancient Celtic myths from the continent, because none have survived. Trying to reconstruct them from the exiguous evidence for pagan religion in Celtic-speaking areas (divine names, iconography, propagandist Classical descriptions of druidical rituals, and so on) is every bit as speculative as trying to do so from medieval Celtic literature.

Thus, unsurprisingly, mythological interpretations of the Four Branches differ wildly from one another. John Rhŷs saw in them a debased Indo-European solar myth, of the sort beloved by Max Müller and his ilk (Rhys, 1892; Rhys, 1901; cf. Thompson, 1977, 371-75). Edward Anwyl believed that the Four Branches were the garbled remnants of cycles of tales revolving around the divine families of Rhiannon, Dôn and Llŷr (Anwyl, 1896-1901). J. A. MacCulloch saw gods and goddesses lurking behind almost every character in the Four Branches, and he identified a number of them with characters from Irish tradition and/or with Gaulish gods known to archaeologists (MacCulloch, 1911, 95-126). W. J. Gruffydd connected the texts with then fashionable notions about mother goddesses (e.g. Gruffydd, 1953). Patrick Ford sees evidence for the detritus of a number of Indo-European myths, notably one involving a horse goddess (Ford, 1977, 4-12; cf. Ford, 1999, xxvi-xxvii). Eric Hamp has argued on philological grounds that the word *mabinogi* originally denoted material concerned with the god Maponos (Hamp, 1999, 104-10). Many modern scholars (e.g. Hemming, 2007a; Hutton, 2011; Wooding, 2017),⁴⁷ are far more cautious in this respect. In the words of John Koch and Fernando Fernández Palacios (2017, 38), ‘we have no

⁴³ Cf. Maier, 1996, for a sceptical examination of supposed similarities between Irish Lug and Gaulish Lugus. This should now be read in conjunction with Carey, 2010, but note that Carey’s critique does not affect this part of Maier’s argument. For apparent similarities between the British god Nodons, Irish Núadu Airgetlám and Welsh Lludd (for *Nudd?*) Llaw Eirint, see Carey, 1984; Haeussler, 2017, 357.

⁴⁴ See Bromwich, 2006, 433; Hughes, 2007a, xxix; Hughes, 2017, xxviii; Sims-Williams, 2011, 11-12, for discussion and further references.

⁴⁵ MacQuarrie, 2004, 178-80; Bromwich, 2006, 432-33; Hughes, 2007a, xxix-xxx; Hughes, 2017, xxix; Mac Cana, 2007, 23; Sims-Williams, 2011, 12-13.

⁴⁶ Although Charles MacQuarrie does note that Manannán, like Manawydan, is a maker of goods (MacQuarrie, 2004, 247, n. 264). Nora Chadwick’s assertion that the fact that Manawydan’s ‘family seat is on the rock of Harlech above Cardigan Bay’ shows that his family were ‘closely connected with the sea’ (Dillon and Chadwick, 1967, 150-51) is desperate. For a recent argument that there are underlying similarities between extant stories about the Irish Findabair and her Welsh counterpart Gwenhwyfar, and that these represent a Celtic sovereignty myth, see MacLeod, 2008.

⁴⁷ In an Irish context, cf. e.g., the scepticism of Nora Chadwick (Dillon and Chadwick, 1967, 154-55) and of James Carney (2005, 480), and the carefully balanced overview of the issue by Jonathan Wooding (2009).

established procedure for recovering pagan gods and myths, or even to say for certain whether this is how the *dramatis personae* of, say, the Mabinogi originated'. The tendency of nineteenth-century comparative mythologists to see pagan gods everywhere in early medieval texts was satirized (with a gratuitous dollop of anti-Semitism) by J. Foster Palmer as long ago as 1885 (p. 195):

If this process of mythification were impartially carried out, most of the names in history might be explained away. Even that of Napoleon has been shown to be thus liable to extermination. The *N* being, of course, a dialectic redundancy, *Apoleon* is simply a form of *Apollo*. The European conquests of Napoleon are thus reduced to figurative expressions for the increasing influence of the rising sun, which, though spreading over the continent of Europe, was unable to penetrate the cloudy atmosphere of Britain. In a similar manner, *Wellington* might be a supplier of water coming from the Emerald Isle to counteract the destroying effects of Apollo's influence; *Gladstone* would represent the *happy influence* of cosmical forces in bringing about an amelioration in the condition of the oppressed classes; while D'Israeli would be a symbol of the increasing power and influence of the Israelitish race in this country in the nineteenth century.⁴⁸

The sort of approach satirized here has lingered longest in Celtic Studies. This must be due to the long shadow of racialist ideas about Celtic primitivism: while sophisticated peoples produce literature, composed by talented individuals with something to say about the society they live in, savages can merely reproduce with increasing incomprehension the superstitions of their ancestors.

Of course, one could argue that the stories derive from Celtic *legends* rather than from mythology. Here we might note, for instance, a number of suggestive similarities between the story of Brân fab Llŷr (Bendigeidfran) and the Irish Bran mac Febail (see, e.g., Hughes, 2007a, xxii-xxiii; Hughes, 2017, xxi-xxii; Carey, 2007, 61). But it is impossible to *prove* that such similarities are due to independent descent from a period of Celtic linguistic unity rather than to more recent contact between Ireland and Wales, to mutual borrowing from a third source, or to coincidence.⁴⁹ Thus John Koch turned to Classical accounts of the Continental Celts and the ancient Britons to argue that the stories of Bendigeidfran and Manawydan were inherited from the distant past and contain grains of historical truth (Koch, 1987; Koch, 1990), but the comparisons he makes are far from exact.

The only thing indubitably Celtic about the Four Branches is the language.⁵⁰ What the tales certainly are, however, is Welsh. They are rooted in the landscape of Wales. For all of their supernatural flourishes, their characters behave according to the conventions of medieval Welsh society (cf., e.g., Davies, 1989, 50; Davies, 2013; Isaac, 2002, 79-80; McKenna, 2003, 107). They stand near the beginning of a Welsh literary tradition which is alive and well today. Catherine McKenna (2011) has plausibly argued that the Four Branches were copied into thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts, not as the garbled remnants of ancient myth, but because they were perceived by the manuscripts' patrons as 'current and stylish' (p. 222).

A plaque in the National Museum of the American Indian in New York reads 'We are still here' (Kilpatrick, 1999, 172). This refers to the real thing, not the Hollywood Indian. Likewise, when Dafydd Iwan sang *Yma o Hyd* in 1981, he traced his nation not to the miasma

⁴⁸ Cf. Thompson, 1977, 375 on Gaidoz's attempt, using the methodology of the comparative mythologists, to prove that Max Müller himself was a myth!

⁴⁹ John Carey (2007), like W. J. Gruffydd, claims that the author of the Four Branches borrowed the Irish story of Bran, although the two scholars' arguments are not alike in detail (see Jarman, 1956-57, 131 for a synopsis of Gruffydd's hypothesis). Patrick Sims-Williams (2011, 14, n. 71) is sceptical.

⁵⁰ When Gwydion and his companions disguise themselves as poets, for instance, the word used is *beirdd*, recognizably a cousin to the term *bardi* used by the Gauls for their poets, and to medieval Irish *baird*, the name of a class of Gaelic poets (Rodway, 2015, 25-26).

of Celticity, but to the Roman general Magnus Maximus (Jobbins, 2011, 86-93).⁵¹ Here, at last, is something that the author of the Four Branches would have recognized! The Four Branches are still being presented as ‘Celtic mythology’, e.g. in Sioned Davies’s recent English translation (Davies, 2007, ix). There is, no doubt, a commercial justification for this (see Cunliffe, 2003, 1-2), but the cost, as I have tried to indicate, is high. You may think this rich coming from someone who earns his bread and butter teaching on a Celtic Studies degree scheme. My answer would be that Celtic Studies in Aberystwyth University (as indeed in other universities) principally consists of the study of the individual Celtic languages and their literatures (cf. Sims-Williams, 1998b, 8). They exist side by side in much the same way that German and French do in the Modern Languages department. Of course, the phantom of ‘Celticity’ sometimes lures in the unsuspecting: I can testify to that!⁵² I once saw a sign outside a church that said ‘Come for cake, stay for Jesus’. I came to Aberystwyth in 1992 looking for Celtica: I stayed because I found Wales.

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⁵¹ Thus the use of this song to illustrate the supposed Celtic ancestry of the Welsh in the now defunct Celtica tourist attraction in Machynlleth (see Sims-Williams, 1998b, 34, n. 140) is ironic.

⁵² Cf. the remarks of Mary-Ann Constantine (2003), with reference to Robert Graves’s *White Goddess*.

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